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AT THE TOP OF THE WORLD WITH A GIRL FOREST GUARD

By Eyre Powell

IN A room of the United States Forest Service headquarters in Denver is a huge canvas on which a relief map of one of Colorado's national forests is taking form under the brushes of a young painter. On the opposite side of the room are drafting boards covered with maps from which the big one is being taken, and on all sides are the paraphernalia of the work. The painter is a maid in the twenties, a little over five feet in height and slender, with a quick friendly smile. Dressed in the conventional artist's smock she wields her brushes with a deft hand as she stands on the stepladder necessary to use in reaching the upper portions of the canvas.

This is Miss Helen Dowe, but the work is only that with which she fills her winter months.

To see Helen Dowe, girl forest guard, on her "regular job" one must go to Colorado in the summer time and travel some fifty miles out of Denver to the Pike National Forest. There in a tiny house, which is bolted to the bare rock on the topmost point of the Devil's Head, to prevent its being blown away by the mountain winds, Miss Dowe stands watch over several hundred square miles of mountain and forest, looking for the first signs of fire.

To get to the Devil's Head lookout station one leaves the automobile at the end of the road and takes the trail which leads to a cabin snuggled down against the foot of the great rock. That is Miss Dowe's home.

Then taking to sharply inclined ladders a climb of 147 feet higher brings one to the station itself, whose windows face in all directions and in the doorway of which one would probably meet the maid herself.

It would be a far different girl from the artist of the Denver forestry headquarters, however. In breeches, and boots of most businesslike style, with the feminine touch added by an embroidered linen smock detracting not a bit from the fact that she is on a real "he job," she is holding a post of tremendous responsibility and is the one girl fire guard in the service at the present time.

From the Devil's Head station 7000 square miles of the most beautiful portions of the Rocky mountains can be seen, all of it forest reserve. From the time the last snow melts in the spring and the forests dry out until the protecting white blanket comes again in the fall, Miss Dowe is responsible for the spotting of any fire that might start in all that region, and it is she who must send the alarm to the nearest point from which rangers can rush to the scene.

During four and one-half months of comparative exile each summer, usually being on duty there from May 15 until about the middle of October, the girl forest guard is "on her own."

She has proved herself entirely capable, too, and no aid from mere men has been necessary in the routine of her work or the upkeep of her station. The tiny lookout, high up on its perch, 9843 feet above the sea, was painted by her, a fresh green and white on the outside, a spotless white enamel within. Down below in her cabin, furniture, window frames, cupboards, shelves and shutters are proof of her skill as a carpenter, and even at the heavier work of woodcutting she has shown up as no amateur with saw and ax. When a fresh supply of grub arrives at the end of the road below she can throw a diamond hitch with the best of them in packing the animals for the trail.

Miss Dowe's post is one that requires eternal vigilance. Periodically during the hours of daylight she must scan every portion of the visible territory through her glasses with minute care, ever watching for the telltale trace of smoke that means the presence of the forest's greatest enemy—fire.

The lookout station is equipped with an Osborne fire-finder, the sight revolving on the rim of its circular "table" ready for instant use. Immediately on seeing smoke through her glasses, Miss Dowe "lines up" on it, and in a trace, by reference to the maps which are a part of the finder, she has found the exact location of the blaze. Then quick, decisive action on the telephone, and somewhere out across the mountains waiting rangers commence to hastily throw shovels, axes and other equipment of the battle onto pack saddles, ready for the dash to the fire.

The fire-finder as described by Miss Dowe is an interesting instrument. "Worth its weight in gold," she says, and she should know, for with it she spotted sixteen fires during 1917, her first season, and as many more during the last summer, and she was able to locate them so exactly that the fighting forces arrived without waste search and in time to nip them in the bud.

"The Osborne finder was invented by a man in the forest service," explains Miss Dowe. "Its sights revolve around the two circular maps on a rim of the 'table.' These maps are set as the land lies from Devil's Head with directions exact.

"When I see smoke I turn the sights until it is in line and then refer to the outer map where the sight line crosses it. This outside one is a profile map; that is, it shows the profiles of mountains and ridges just as I can see them from the windows, and it circles around the whole 360 degrees of the finder's circle to the point where the smoke appears on the real mountains and then picking out the place on the sight line that corresponds, I can get the approximate location. Then following the line onto the corresponding point on the inside map, which is done in contour with Devil's Head as its center, with a few simple calculations I have the exact location of the fire, with all trails, ridges, canyons and other details all shown. The telephone and the boys do the rest."

Last fall Miss Dowe was snowed in by the first heavy blizzard of the year, and the story is told of her spectacular struggle through the storm to Sedalia, the nearest town, in returning to civilization after her season on watch.

"Oh, please don't believe that story," cried the maid from the top of her stepladder when asked about it in her Denver forestry headquarters "studio." She abandoned map-making and with paint cans and brushes on her knees sat down on the top step to explain.

"It sounded sensational the way it was told," she said. "But it really wasn't at all. You know, I have to stay on Devil's Head until the first snow comes and wets down the forests until there isn't any more danger of fire."

HOWEVER, Denver papers had it otherwise and gave Miss Dowe credit for playing a heroine's role in the long dash through the blizzard.

"Every one asks me how I happened to become a forest guard," remarked the maid when the question was repeated for probably the 'steenth time. "I was an artist on a Denver paper up to two years ago, but I have always loved the mountains. We have so much more chance to get acquainted with them here than Easterners do, and I had tramped and climbed all over them. My work inside seemed dull and confining after all of the magnificence to be found in the Rockies, and I determined to get out all of the time if possible, and so I applied to the forest service for the position.

"It took two years to convince them that a girl would make a good fire lookout, but I finally did it and I was stationed at Devil's Head, where I have been for two seasons. I'll go back there in May, but I also hope to take the examination for forest rangers during the summer. It has been thrown open to women, you know.

Miss Dowe is versatile, and it is a saying of those in the forest service that she can build a cabin, paint one of the western sunsets or play hostess to visitors with equal skill. And those who have been fortunate enough to receive an invitation to dine in the cabin at the foot of Devil's Head vouch for the fact that she is an excellent cook, too.

While Miss Dowe is one of the two women who have ever held a forest guard's position, she has shown officials of the forest service that they have the keen eye, constant attention and love of their work that make them successful in the responsible post, it is said.

Fuel is one of Miss Dowe's lone-hand housekeeping problems, but a crosscut saw and double-bitted ax are no strangers to her hand, and soon she has a pile sufficient for the kitchen and for the chill nights up there where only the most adventurous clouds climb

Nearly two miles above sea level, Miss Dowe guards 7000 square miles of the most beautifully forested portions of the Rocky Mountains with her fire-finder. This instrument, invented by a fellow forest guard, tells her where that spiral of smoke, indicating a blaze, is located so accurately that she is able, by telephone, to send the guard nearest the menace to it

Well, let's take the elevator to Devil's Head, Miss Dowe's lookout station, which is literally strapped, with steel, to a mountain-top, where it hangs like the nest of an eagle. It's only 147 feet above the home in which she lives alone for about four months of the year, and you must do your own elevating, as the ladders show, for each one of those feet